

John 3:16
John 3:1-21
January 28, 2007

JOHN 3:16

You've seen it on big banners held up behind the goalposts at televised football games. You've seen it on billboards. You can find it embossed on "T"-shirts, on baseball caps, and on the reverse side of handheld mirrors.

John 3:16 has become a cultural icon. All you need is the reference. You know the rest, right? You couldn't identify Jeremiah 9:23 or Hosea 11:8 or Matthew 6:3, but you do know John 3:16.

Is that a good thing? Is it a good thing that John 3:16 has become such a pervasive cultural icon? Personally, I wouldn't hold up the banner or wear the cap, because to me it trivializes something very important. It makes superficial something very deep. It reduces the rich and deep and beautiful and compelling gospel message to one verse, one reference, one slogan.

I can't imagine Jesus doing it either, holding up a sign or reducing his message to a single slogan. That's not the way Jesus operated. If you review his public speeches and his private conversations in any of the gospels and particularly in John, you will find that Jesus almost never says the same thing in the same way twice. His message is consistent, but he expresses the message with different words and comes at the subject from different directions with each different person, with each different group.

And yet, why John 3:16? Why this verse? Why has this one verse become the slogan? Why has this one statement of Jesus, about Jesus, come to stand in for the gospel message as a whole? Playing to the TV cameras may seem silly or inauthentic, but the message of John 3:16 is compelling. It may not be the whole of the gospel -- we do need to hear the rest, too -- but it gives us some astoundingly good news: *God love[s] the world ... so much.*

So I invite you to listen in on Jesus' private and personal conversation with Nicodemus. Listen to the whole of the conversation. Hear John 3:16 in its larger context. Hear what Jesus had to say to one Jewish leader and what Jesus has to say to you.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a teacher and careful practitioner of God's Law, comes at night to Jesus. Why does he come? What does he want? What does he come to ask of Jesus? But, you object, Nicodemus doesn't ask anything at all! He simply makes an observation: *Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him.*

But why then did he come? He wouldn't make the effort to initiate a private conversation with Jesus just to make a comment! Surely he wants something! You do hear his unspoken questions, don't you?

Nicodemus is restless, like all of us are restless. We are always restless, always unsatisfied, always looking for something more. We live, we win, we lose, we gain, we learn, we exist, we experience, we grow, but still, we are restless. Still we long for something more, something we do not yet have, something we have not yet found.

What is it? What are we restless for? What are we waiting for? What are we longing for? You do know what I mean -- the undefined but very real ache or sigh or desire that maybe tomorrow, maybe tomorrow it will come?

Is it joy that we are longing for? Is it truth? Is it goodness? Is it love? Are we longing for something that is not just a fleeting shadow, but the real thing? But God is all these things! God is goodness. God is truth. God is love. God gives joy. God is the real thing and the source of all that is real! It is God we long for! We are restless for God!

Listen again to what Nicodemus says: *We know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him.* God sent you. God is with you. So tell me about God! Tell me how I can know God! Show me where God is! Nicodemus is restless for God.

Jesus hears his unspoken question, and answers it. *No one can see the Kingdom of God* -- which means to see God, know God, live in communion with God -- *without being born again.* I don't think that was the answer Nicodemus was looking for!

Born again. There's a phrase that carries a lot of meaning, and a lot of baggage! There are folks who call themselves "born-again" Christians and will ask you if you are a "born-again" Christian. Well, are you? It's a good question to ponder, because the metaphor -- being born again -- is powerful and evocative, but when the metaphor is used as a label, I'm not sure that it is all that helpful anymore. Jesus uses the expression only once, with Nicodemus, not with anyone else. For us to use it as a means of judging between people, even of judging between believers -- as if we have a right to judge any other human being -- is ludicrous!

Born again. What Jesus tells Nicodemus -- and us if we listen in -- is this: seeing God's kingdom, knowing who God is, knowing God, finding your way into God's presence, is not a matter of learning some new facts, or of setting off in a new direction, or of rearranging your priorities, or of changing your lifestyle, or of rededicating your life to a more worthy aim. How can you see the Kingdom of God? Jesus' answer is: *You can't!* There is nothing you can do to find your way to God. As you are, you will never get there. You have to start again. You have to begin again. You will have to become something/someone entirely new. You have to be born all over again. And you can no more make that happen than you could the first time around! Only God can do it!

And God does do it. Because God loves the world. Because God loves the world ... so much!

The world is continually evolving. Nature and history relentlessly move forward, leaving time and memory and people in their wake. And who cares? Who loves the world? We do. We are invested in its future. We work and plan and hope, not just for our own benefit, but for the benefit of our children and other people's children, and for the benefit of the earth itself. We do not merely strive to survive in the world as it is, we dream of the world as it could be.

And Jesus, the Word of God, testifies that God loves the world, too. God is invested in its future, in our future, and God does what only God can do to make that future happen, the future we long for, the future God has in mind. God gave. God gave the Word, the light, Jesus, God's only Son. "Son" implies intimate relationship, firsthand knowledge, direct connection. A Son knows his Father and a Son can introduce us to his Father.

God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. We are restless, for God and for life in all its fullness, and this is how we will find what we seek -- by believing in Jesus.

By believing in Jesus. Not just believing Jesus, as if finding life were only a matter of learning some new facts, of listening to what Jesus has to say. Not just believing something about Jesus, as if you are saved by what you think, by holding the right set of beliefs. And not just by belief itself, as in, *You just gotta believe*, as if wishing itself can save you.

No, we are saved -- which means we find the fullness of life and love and truth and joy for which we are restless -- by believing in Jesus. By staking our future on him, by putting our lives in his hands, by giving our lives to him, by dying to all we have been so that he can make us new, make us what we can be, allow us to be born ... again.

Don't be scared off by all the cultural baggage, by the sign-waving football fans or the "born-again" believers who set themselves up as the gatekeepers of heaven. You know you are restless, just like Nicodemus, just like me. We want more! We want life! We want God!

And we will have God, not because we will succeed in finding God, but because God has found us, because God has come to us, because God has given us a Son in whom there is life. *For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that every one who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.* That's not a promise. That's the reality!